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“May I ask what you’re doing here?”

The question drifted across the border between dreams and consciousness. Rita squinted, surprised by the daylight. She hadn’t turned to the figure at the driver’s side window--she was still trying to piece together the day up until now--but the flat tone told her it was a cop and not a resident or business owner. Their voices, the ones who took it upon themselves to bother her anyway, invariably shook with irritation or fear. Cops never showed any emotion.

She pondered a lame excuse, but it didn’t matter. He’d already seen the coat hangers, the piles of dirty laundry, the pillows and blankets, the water tank, the

storage totes, the cookware, the Weber grill, the hot plate. In one quick, well-practiced movement, she rolled down the window, offered a lukewarm apology and started the engine. She knew he wanted to keep her in his Omaha suburb about as badly as she wanted to stay. She took off, tail between her legs.

Quarter after five. Out for about two hours, she guessed. Rita'd been taking sleep wherever and whenever she could find it. There'd been stretches, especially at the beginning, when she'd kept awake all night and day. That led to some mild fits of panic and paranoia, which then fed fourteen-hour sequences of dreamless slumber that felt more like gaps in time than sleep. Lately, she'd discovered a circadian rhythm all her own, ignorant of sunlight, a wavelength of intermittent peaks of lucidity following short troughs of rest. (She'd read about some Silicon Valley tech bro extolling the virtues of this sleep pattern years back, but she'd fallen into it entirely by accident.)

Rita turned on some music and found her way back to I-29 heading north. A few more hours until the first security checkpoint. A neighbor had come in summer and said there'd likely be two: one for drugs and another for bombs and other incendiaries, to stop the religious nuts, conspiracy theorists and lone wolves from ruining months of government research.

Earlier today, a news report said experts estimated the population of the Dakotas had tripled already. Maybe not surprising, considering how desolate it used to be, but hard to believe for a visit that lasted twenty-four hours.

In the weeks following the arrival, she'd joined some online support groups for people whose loved

ones went missing on April 12th. Rita never lasted long. It got hard convincing parents that their teenage daughters--and it was almost always teenage daughters--had used it as an excuse to run away. Of course, they'd project their own denial at her, accusing John of running off with cliched "other woman" types: tennis instructors, preschool teachers, pole dancers, cocktail waitresses.

Brilliant puffs of pink, red and orange smeared the western sky, the dry grasses of the empty Dakota prairie a deep lavender beneath it. It became easy on these endless stretches of road to give your mind over to speculation, about both John and the visitors. No one knew why they had come, what they wanted, where they'd come from, why they had stayed such a short time, why they'd left, if they'd return, how their technology managed to defy all our understanding of physics. It made John's disappearance pedestrian in comparison.

All government data she could find showed a small uptick in disappearances in mid-April, but that could be easily explained by runaways, suicides, and good, old-fashioned human murders. (She couldn't find any data for the other two landings, in China and the Central African Republic, but there weren't any reliable news reports about abductions there.)

If John were any other man, she'd have been certain of his infidelity. But he was probably the only man she knew who didn't frequent strip clubs, watch porn or fall prey to the wandering eye in public.

A mistress would've made things easier, wrapped their growing estrangement in a pretty little bow. In the past few years, they shared almost nothing, beyond finances and a bedroom. And neither

worked enough--she a bank teller, he a warehouse manager--to excuse their distance. Rita'd been searching for answers for two years before the landing. What was another?

As the golden hour bled into the night, Rita spotted a dark figure along the shoulder. The cars ahead rubbernecked, but none stopped. As she got closer Rita saw the figure was alone. A woman. Or girl maybe? Her foot took action before her brain consented. The overloaded Sonata fishtailed, but dry pavement ceded control and she came to a full stop along the shoulder.

A glance through the passenger side window revealed a young girl many months into her pregnancy.

"Going to the landing site?" Rita asked. The girl responded with a silent nod.

Rita unlocked the door, and quickly swept the sweat-stained yoga pants, sandwich wrappers, empty No Doz bottles and a mess of USB chargers tangled up like Christmas lights onto the floor, figuring a pregnant teen illegally hitchhiking along the interstate wouldn't be picky.

The girl sat down with a polite nod. She was white with bands of sunburn on her face and neck and blond streaks in her hair, her face round either from the baby weight or leftover from her own childhood. She didn't look a day over sixteen.

"Thanks for stopping. It was hell trying to hitch a ride," the girl said once they hit cruising speed.

"Yeah, I wonder why."

Rita hadn't meant to sound sarcastic. A month without the eroding force of small talk and pleasantries had sharpened all her edges.

“The latest in a long line of bad decisions.”

“Well, you’re young. That’s the time to make them, I guess.” With the permanence of those decisions so prominently on display the words rang hollow.

“Where you from?” she asked.

“Alabama. I’m Dannie, by the way.”

“Colorado. Rita.”

“Your first time to the landing site?”

The girl spoke politely and calmly, as if Rita were a friend of a friend she’d vicariously admired for years through second-hand anecdotes.

“Yep.”

It was still an hour’s drive to Sioux Falls as the last bits of daylight were squeezed from the sky. She turned the music down a few ticks.

“I don’t want to pry, but how’d you end up out here?”

“No, it’s fine. I didn’t hitch the entire way from Alabama. I made it up to Des Moines in my dad’s old beater before it finally broke down.”

“You come up all alone?”

“Yeah.” Dannie spoke as if that had answered all of Rita’s questions. “I’m keeping the baby, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Rita wasn’t sure what to say to that. She vaguely recalled some online chatter about pregnant teens from red states visiting the landing site in hopes the residual radiation (purely speculative, as officials insisted there was none) would terminate the fetus. But there was so much conflicting information and conspiracy theorizing--she’s sure she’d read about other groups who insisted a visit cured infertility or bestowed offspring with super intelligence.

“I just wanted to visit before the baby came. Figured this was my last chance.”

“What about your parents? Or the father?”

“Oh, there’s no father.”

Jesus, did she really believe that?

It had been almost five months since April 12th. And she looked about that far along. But a fit of giggling soon followed.

“I’m just messing with you.”

Her laughter was like an old song she hadn’t heard in years. It had been too long since she’d heard someone laugh that wasn’t herself chuckling at some silly podcast. At least not laughter like this, not the weak, cordial chuckle of a gas station attendant, but something warm and familiar, so ignorant of the chasm between them.

“No, I know the idiot’s name. His dad’s a big shot pastor. Making me keep it, not that I’d ever get rid of it. I just hope he gets his dad’s looks and not his brain.”

Dannie looked around the car, as if finally noticing the clutter.

“You moving up here?”

“No.”

Rita flicked open a pill bottle with her thumb and popped a few caffeine pills. She stopped counting by this point, but the only effect they seemed to have anymore was that she couldn’t quit taking them.

“Not a light packer then?”

“I’ve been looking for someone. For some time. I figured he might be up here.”

“You want to talk about it?”

For months Rita hadn’t. It was all she talked about back in April and May, but lately she tried to

focus her mind on the quotidian: avoiding cops, heating her car while she slept, drying her laundry, managing battery power and fuel levels, resupply runs, finding suitable locations for dumpster dives.

“John went missing on April 12th. My husband. I know he wasn’t abducted. But he left for work that morning, went out to lunch alone after the news broke and never came home. Wouldn’t answer his cell all day.” She figured, now, she’d let it all out. “Phone service was spotty that day, with all the pandemonium I figured he’d just wait and see me at home. I got back at three once the bank closed. I didn’t even try calling until six. Had to drive over to his work. They said they hadn’t seen him since morning. Went to the police station later, but they had enough problems on their hands. Neighbors, friends, co-workers. Nobody’d heard anything.”

“His car was found two days later in the strip mall parking lot near his warehouse. The last time cameras spotted him he tossed his keys and phone inside the car, kept his glasses and wallet and walked off down the road.”

“Do you think he...?”

“Hitched a ride with the visitors? No, I don’t think he would’ve interested them.”

“Oh... I was gonna say ‘killed himself.’”

Rita hadn’t expected that. But she’d been over this with friends, neighbors and police dozens of times.

“Nothing found near our home, but there’s lots of big, empty forests and fast rivers once you get out of the city. Anything’s possible. Plenty of predators big enough to take care of a corpse, too.”

It would be more difficult to talk about if she believed any of it. But even though she doubted she'd ever find John, she somehow knew he was still alive.

Dannie dug through her bag and pulled out an apple and then a knife--not a switch blade or a Swiss-army knife, but an inconveniently-sized kitchen carving knife. The absurdity dampened the terror, as Dannie squeezed the fruit between her legs and chopped at it.

"Jesus, here." Rita reached into the back and grabbed her cutting board. "We can stop for some food if you'd like."

"How much farther is it?"

"I was planning on stopping in Aberdeen, for tonight at least. We're still a good three or four hours out. Maybe longer with the checkpoints."

Once they hit Sioux Falls, Rita found an off-brand grocery store away from the price gougers along the interstate. She let Dannie go off on her own while she went to the bathroom to fill up a pair of water jugs, half hoping the girl might tag along with someone better equipped to take care of her.

They met up in the checkout aisle. Dannie's cart was surprisingly filled with dry staples, canned goods and none of the junk a teenager thrived on.

"You see this?" Dannie said, pointing to yesterday's USA Today.

Rita had heard. A prominent Wall Street investor had gone missing on April 12th. It was probably the most high-profile claim of "abduction," at least in the US. But when you steal half a billion from the rich, people take the time to do some fact-

checking. He was found by the end of July, holed up in a friend's summer home in upstate New York.

The real star of the fiasco was the business partner, a stocky, exuberant Russian from Omsk who claimed he saw the man vanish into thin air and was now saying the man who'd returned to Earth was an imposter, a visitor in disguise.

"I suppose that's one way to beat the charges," Rita joked.

"I heard he was caught because he sent his grandmother a card on her birthday."

"Glad to know the aliens still respect family values."

Dannie laughed again. Away from her sardine can on wheels, the sound was given breathing room. Rita'd never stolen, but this was the first time since her trip began that she didn't feel like a criminal in a supermarket.

"You ever think of hiring a private investigator?"

"Too much money. The ones I talked to said it wouldn't be worth it. Said he'd either died or ran off with another woman."

"What about the police?"

"I filed a missing person's report but middle-aged men aren't exactly the most high-priority demographic. Not unless..." Rita gestured back toward the newspaper.

"So you think he came here?"

"Not exactly. It's just... the next logical place to look."

Rita had spent the past two months canvassing the western US in her makeshift home, knocking on doors of John's distant cousins, former classmates and a semi-famous guitarist John used to be in a

band with. The routes were haphazard, drawn by rumor and hearsay, as well as her own worries about law enforcement and finances. None had seen him and some weren't sure they ever had. For a few, even photo evidence of the man sparked no recollection.

John never needed companionship, and maybe that was what drew her to him in the first place. Partly an aversion to clingy, emotionally needy men, partly the enchanting mystique of the "quiet one" (back when rock stardom still felt like a remote possibility), Rita had fallen head over heels when they first met in the early 2000s. While the demands of adulthood forced her to be more outgoing and sociable, John never changed. He never joined social media, not even to promote the self-produced album he'd recorded several years back.

John had few ties in Denver. He'd grown up near Portland, Oregon though blood relations were few and far between. John had only known his mother from Polaroids. She'd died when he was a toddler, and his father, already in his fifties at the time of his birth, died from pancreatic cancer when he was in high school. A few of the closer relatives cared enough to offer Rita their theories: he'd be returned next April 12th--Easter, coincidentally--as a spokesman for the visitors sent to enlighten humanity, he'd assumed a new identity for one more shot at the big time, he'd uncovered the visit as a government hoax and had either been disappeared or was still working with the underground to expose the truth. The only useful visit had been John's rock star friend. ("Star" was probably a bit of a stretch, though. Mick Edelmann, lead singer and guitarist for Hidden Atlas

wasn't doing late night talk shows. Licensing his 2005 indie hit "In the Dark" to a dish detergent brand paid the bills.) Mick, used to life on the road, told her how to live out of her car, hooked her up with a bunch of swag from his last tour and convinced her to focus her search around the landing site.